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## Twenty years of jazz

By [Martin Z. Kasdan Jr.](#)

The University of Louisville's School of Music is celebrating 20 years of stellar jazz presentations, and Mike Tracy, director of the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Studies Program, found it hard to choose highlights. "Meeting and hanging with many of the legends who have passed — like Dave Brubeck, Elvin Jones, Ray Brown, Michael Brecker, Art Farmer, Billy Taylor and Stanley Turrentine — certainly come to mind," he says. "Others like Toots Thielemans, McCoy Tyner, Phil Woods and more who are still with us also created great moments. All these masters are my musical heroes, and I am just thankful that we were able to bring them to Louisville to interact with our students."

Tracy is enthusiastic about this year's artists, as well. The first night features Amina Figarova, of whom Tracy says, "(She) will be with her sextet performing her exciting compositions. She is an artist who has not appeared in our area and will bring a contemporary element to our festival." Her most recent release is *Twelve*, her 12th album, with 12 original compositions. She has appeared at major festivals and concert venues around the world, including the Newport Jazz Festival and a stunning performance at the 2012 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, with music inspired by her reaction to Hurricane Katrina.

Born in Azerbaijan, Figarova moved to the Netherlands to study before coming to Berklee in Boston in 1992 with her husband and flutist, Bart Platteau. She discussed her background and work by phone from her home in New York.

"The moment we got to Boston, we started interacting with students and musicians and jamming. I felt incredible energy; it was clear from moment one that we were in the right place. While we were studying, we were going back and forth to New York, and that felt even bigger ... We just moved two years ago. Here in New York, there are so many new bands and musicians with so many great ideas ... that inspires me a great deal."

As a teacher, she stresses the importance of students being true to themselves. "Anyone can play the scales, develop the technique ... but not everyone can find a strong, individual voice." Figarova has been inspired by arrangers and composers such as Gil Evans and Maria Schneider. "I have a very large sound in my mind, whether I am writing for sextet or big band," she says. Keeping her sextet together is important: "I've worked hard and fought for this band, and it pays off."

Of Joe Magnarelli and Dick Oatts, Tracy noted that they are master performers who have played with everyone in the jazz world. They will be featured with the Jazz Ensemble directed by John La Barbera, offering an evening of great big band jazz. Oatts was previously in Louisville in 2004, both with his own group and at U of L as a featured soloist with the renowned Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

Violinist Zach Brock returns to town for a matinee with pianist Aaron Goldberg. Tracy says, "The concert Sunday will offer an intimate duo setting in Bird Recital Hall, where the audience and performers are quite close. The violin is an under-utilized instrument in the jazz world, and Zach is an amazing performer with ties to Kentucky and Louisville. Aaron Goldberg is a masterful accompanist."

As half of a quartet, the duo previously recorded *Almost Never Was*, reaching The Chicago Tribune's Top 10 Jazz Albums for 2012. "The challenge of playing in an acoustic duo, if one thinks of it that way, is that each player is more exposed in every aspect of the performance," Brock says. "This is a nice change for a violinist in the context of a jazz performance, because, in more typical jazz configurations, we are used to being dominated by the volume and density of the other instruments. Playing duo with piano is very comfortable. When you aren't fighting to be heard, you make different creative choices. I find it very liberating. I am excited for people to hear the new repertoire we'll bring in this context."